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Sen. Leahy's intelligence appraisal

7 ROBERT HEALY

WASHINGTON - Vermont has produced unusual senators, such as George Aiken and Ralph Flanders - straight, solid and courageous. Flanders in the '50s stood up to Joseph McCarthy on Red baiting; Aiken in the '60s stood up to Lyndon Johnson on Vietnam. Patrick Leahy is in the Aiken-Flanders tradition.

After 7½ years on the Senate Intelligence Committee, Leahy in an interview had this to say on what went wrong:

"The president has surrounded himself with people with no real sense of history; with no real sense of responsibility for those who come after them. They are more interested in getting elected to government than they are in governing, so they look for the short fix.

"They have constantly substituted covert action policy for foreign policy, even though it never works; never has in the past and, in all likelihood, won't in the future. They want to deal very much in secrecy, where they manage carefully the news that comes out. In photo opportunities and press conferences, in well-staged State of the Union messages where the hero stands up [in the balcony], to what angle you are allowed the photograph the president when he visits the troops in Korea.

"So that throws a monkey wrench ... into an open and unrestrained debate on foreign policy. And how do you avoid a debate on foreign policy? You turn it into a covert policy and now you only have a few people around and you can keep it secret - and all of a sudden you realize you

can send Ollie North over there and open a bank account and we can ask the sultan of whatever to pay for our thing. And nobody ever, ever, ever asks the question: what do you suppose the sultan might ask us for in return? Later on we are telling the ayatollahs what is going on, but we don't tell the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff what is going on.

"It is a prescription for disaster. These people now have the White House where they can blackmail them, but all of it because they have not thought through the consequences and because by keeping it secret and ... they have removed all the checks and balances that go into a normal debate ... and look what happened," said Leahy.

Leahy said US intelligence "is a lot better than a lot of people give it credit." He said the best people in intelligence are those who collect and distribute unshaded information and analysis to the president and the secretaries of state and defense. What troubles Leahy is the other two kinds of intelligence operatives. One shades the truth and "this year it is that the Soviets are 12 feet tall ... or worse yet, those who would use covert action to make it turn out the way they want. Since we don't like the government of XYZ and our intelligence tells us further that if we do this or that and the other thing, the government of XYZ won't be there anymore, we'll have it overthrown, discredited, whatever. That problem within our intelligence still goes on."

"The other part is how much beyond lip service do they have to give to the oversight committee. There have been times when I was there where you've been lied to - although

very, very few, remarkably few. Instances where material was withheld, contrary to the law, and the most public example of that was the president's finding on Iran, that was a total violation of the law not to report that to intelligence oversight. And then this becomes almost an ad hominem thing, you didn't ask me that specific question, you asked me did we carry out that operation in April in such and such a country, but you didn't ask me if we had anything going in the last three minutes of March 31."

Leahy said the "true professionals" in intelligence do not operate that way and do not shade analysis to satisfy whatever anyone wants.

He said that under the former CIA head, William Casey, "There has been more emphasis on the covert guys, to the quick fix; and he brought in and surrounded himself with those who were perfectly willing to bypass the normal checks and balances and work directly with him. And, of course, those were the ones who knew what Oliver North was doing and never said a word," said Leahy.

As early as 1983, Leahy warned the administration of security problems at the US Embassy in Moscow, which may result in the \$100 million building being torn down. Said Leahy, "This is an administration that talks tough but has acted weak."

Flanders and Aiken were Republicans. Leahy is a Democrat. They have been good representatives of Vermont because they have not been compromised in the Senate.

Robert Healy is an associate editor of the Globe.